**Dombey and Son**(ch 6) by Charles Dickens

*Richards has been living in the grand old London residence of Mr Dombey for some time now, employed as wet nurse to the long-awaited little boy, Paul (following the death of his mother). Here she decides to venture out and pay her own family an overdue visit, although here the landscape of ‘home’ feels caught up in a period of great change as the railroads force their way through the living places of the poor.*

The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, moldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.

In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement.

But as yet, the neighbourhood was shy to own the Railroad. One or two bold speculators had projected streets; and one had built a little, but had stopped among the mud and ashes to consider farther of it. A bran-new Tavern, redolent of fresh mortar and size, and fronting nothing at all, had taken for its sign The Railway Arms; but that might be rash enterprise--and then it hoped to sell drink to the workmen. So, the Excavators' House of Call had sprung up from a beer-shop; and the old-established Ham and Beef Shop had become the Railway Eating House, with a roast leg of pork daily, through interested motives of a similar immediate and popular description. Lodging-house keepers were favourable in like manner; and for the like reasons were not to be trusted. The general belief was very slow. There were frowzy fields, and cow-houses, and dunghills, and dustheaps, and ditches, and gardens, and summer-houses, and carpet-beating grounds, at the very door of the Railway. Little tumuli of oyster shells in the oyster season, and of lobster shells in the lobster season, and of broken crockery and faded cabbage leaves in all seasons, encroached upon its high places. Posts, and rails, and old cautions to trespassers, and backs of mean houses, and patches of wretched vegetation, stared it out of countenance. Nothing was the better for it, or thought of being so. If the miserable waste ground lying near it could have laughed, it would have laughed it to scorn, like many of the miserable neighbours.

Staggs's Gardens was uncommonly incredulous. It was a little row of houses, with little squalid patches of ground before them, fenced off with old doors, barrel staves, scraps of tarpaulin, and dead bushes; with bottomless tin kettles and exhausted iron fenders, thrust into the gaps. Here, the Staggs's Gardeners trained scarlet beans, kept fowls and rabbits, erected rotten summer-houses (one was an old boat), dried clothes, and smoked pipes. Some were of opinion that Staggs's Gardens derived its name from a deceased capitalist, one Mr. Staggs, who had built it for his delectation. Others, who had a natural taste for the country, held that it dated from those rural times when the antlered herd, under the familiar denomination of Staggses, had resorted to its shady precincts. Be this as it may, Staggs's Gardens was regarded by its population as a sacred grove not to be withered by railroads; and so confident were they generally of its long outliving any such ridiculous inventions, that the master chimney-sweeper at the corner, who was understood to take the lead in the local politics of the Gardens, had publicly declared that on the occasion of the Railroad opening, if ever it did open, two of his boys should ascend the flues of his dwelling, with instructions to hail the failure with derisive jeers from the chimney-pots.

To this unhallowed spot, the very name of which had hitherto been carefully concealed from Mr. Dombey by his sister, was little Paul now borne by Fate and Richards.

\*\*\*

**Extract from chapter 35**

*Proud businessman, Dombey, has recently married his second wife, Edith, yet they do not love each other and the marriage is already unhappy. Dombey’s first wife had died giving birth to Dombey’s much-wanted son, Paul, but the boy too died young and Dombey’s grief and pride has isolated him from the true and sincere love of his older child, Florence. In this extract Dickens conveys a change in this father-daughter relationship.*

‘I beg your pardon. Shall I go away, Papa?’ said Florence faintly, hesitating at the door.

‘No,’ returned Mr Dombey, looking round over his shoulder; ‘you can come and go here, Florence, as you please. This is not my private room.’

Florence entered, and sat down at a distant little table with her work: finding herself for the first time in her life - for the very first time within her memory from her infancy to that hour - alone with her father, as his companion. She, his natural companion, his only child, who in her lonely life and grief had known the suffering of a breaking heart; who, in her rejected love, had never breathed his name to God at night, but with a tearful blessing, heavier on him than a curse; who had prayed to die young, so she might only die in his arms; who had, all through, repaid the agony of slight and coldness, and dislike, with patient unexacting love, excusing him, and pleading for him, like his better angel!

She trembled, and her eyes were dim. His figure seemed to grow in height and bulk before her as he paced the room: now it was all blurred and indistinct; now clear again, and plain; and now she seemed to think that this had happened, just the same, a multitude of years ago. She yearned towards him, and yet shrank from his approach. Unnatural emotion in a child, innocent of wrong! Unnatural the hand that had directed the plough, which furrowed up her gentle nature for the sowing of its seeds!

Bent upon not distressing or offending him by her distress, Florence controlled herself, and sat quietly at her work. After a few more turns across and across the room, he left off pacing it; and withdrawing into a shadowy corner at some distance, where there was an easy chair, covered his head with a handkerchief, and composed himself to sleep.

It was enough for Florence to sit there watching him; turning her eyes towards his chair from time to time; watching him with her thoughts, when her face was intent upon her work; and sorrowfully glad to think he *could* sleep, while she was there, and that he was not made restless by her strange and long-forbidden presence.

What would have been her thoughts had she known that he was steadily regarding her; that the veil upon his face, by accident or design, was so adjusted that his sight was free, and that it never wandered from her face for an instant. That when she looked towards him, in the obscure, dark corner, her speaking eyes, more earnest and pathetic in their voiceless speech than all the orators of all the world, and impeaching him more nearly in their mute address, met his, and did not know it! That when she bent her head again over her work, he drew his breath more easily, but with the same attention looked upon her still - upon her white brow and her falling hair, and busy hands; and, once attracted, seemed to have no power to turn his eyes away!

And what were his thoughts meanwhile? With what emotions did he prolong the attentive gaze covertly directed on his unknown daughter? Was there reproach to him in the quiet figure and the mild eyes? Had he begun to feel her disregarded claims, and did they touch him home at last, and waken him to some sense of his cruel injustice?

There are yielding moments in the lives of the sternest and harshest of men, though such men often keep their secret well. The sight of her in her beauty, almost changed into a woman without his knowledge, may have struck out some such moments even in his life of pride. Some passing thought that he had had a happy home within his reach - had had a household spirit bending at his feet - had overlooked it in his stiff-necked sullen arrogance, and had wandered away and lost himself, may have engendered them. Some simple eloquence distinctly heard, though only uttered in her eyes, unconscious that he read them, as ‘By the death-beds I have tended, by the childhood I have suffered, by our meeting in this dreary house at midnight, by the cry wrung from me in the anguish of my heart, oh, father, turn to me and seek a refuge in my love before it is too late!’ may have arrested them. Meaner and lower thoughts, as that his dead boy was now superseded by new ties, and he could forgive the having been supplanted in his affection, may have occasioned them. The mere association of her as an ornament, with all the ornament and pomp about him, may have been sufficient. But as he looked, he softened to her, more and more. As he looked, he saw her for an instant by a clearer and brighter light, not bending over that child’s pillow as his rival - monstrous thought - but as the spirit of his home, and in the action tending himself no less, as he sat once more with his bowed-down head upon his hand at the foot of the little bed. He felt inclined to speak to her, and call her to him. The words ‘Florence, come here!’ were rising to his lips - but slowly and with difficulty, they were so very strange - when they were checked and stifled by a footstep on the stair.

It was his wife’s. She had exchanged her dinner dress for a loose robe, and unbound her hair, which fell freely about her neck. But this was not the change in her that startled him.

‘Florence, dear, ‘she said, ‘I have been looking for you everywhere.’

As she sat down by the side of Florence, she stooped and kissed her hand. He hardly knew his wife. She was so changed. It was not merely that her smile was new to him - though that he had never seen; but her manner, the tone of her voice, the light of her eyes, the interest, and confidence, and winning wish to please, expressed in all - this was not Edith.

‘Softly, dear Mamma. Papa is asleep.’

It was Edith now. She looked towards the corner where he was, and he knew that face and manner very well.

‘I scarcely thought you could be here, Florence.’

Again how altered and how softened in an instant!

‘I left early,’ pursued Edith, ‘purposely to sit upstairs and talk with you. But, going to your room, I found my bird was flown, and I have been waiting ever since, expecting its return.’

If it had been a bird, indeed, she could not have taken it more tenderly and gently to her breast, than she did Florence.

‘Come, dear!’

‘Papa will not expect to find me, I suppose, when he wakes,’ hesitated Florence.

‘Do you he think he will, Florence?’ said Edith, looking full upon her.

Florence dropped her head, and rose, and put up her work-basket. Edith drew her hand through her arm, and they went out of the room like sisters. Her very step was different and new to him, Mr Dombey thought, as his eyes followed her to the door.

He sat in his shadowy corner so long, that the church clocks struck the hour three times before he moved that night. All that while his face was still intent upon the spot where Florence had been seated. The room grew darker, as the candles waned and went out; but a darkness gathered on his face, exceeding any that the night could cast, and rested there.